

Lawrence, Bonita. “Real” Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood. Vancouver: UBC Press. 2004, xviii + 303 p. Index.

Reviewed by: Maximilian C. Forte

“I grew up in a family that identified itself, for the first few years of my life, as expatriate British,” author Bonita Lawrence tells us in the preface to *“Real” Indians and Others* (p. xi). Lawrence recalls the “mahogany-skinned uncles, and aunts with Native features but French accents,” who visited her home, part of her mother’s family, but were “the silenced side of our family identity” (p. xii). As they did not fit in with her parents’ self-definition of “Britishness,” the ostensibly non-European appearances of her relatives went unexplained. Lawrence was forced to be “white” in a society dominated both by negative prejudices against Aboriginals and an ever restrictive system for essentially defining indigenes out of existence by virtue of their not adhering to imposed regulations of “Indianness.” Lawrence, like so many non-status, mixed-blood urban Aboriginals in Canada, was taught not to identify with her Native ancestry: “Nativeness has become too associated with pain and shame” (p. xvi). Regulating Nativeness so as to restrict it to shrinking reserves, while culturally scorning and repressing expressions of Nativeness off reserve, combine to produce “lifetime habits of silence,” habits learned from childhoods in residential schools or in trying to make one’s way through a society that has been, and remains, white dominated and racist, a society still deeply engaged in a project of racial deforestation that denies Aboriginal presence, save for a few pockets. [1]

The core of *“Real” Indians and Others* centers on what the author refers to as the “organized obliteration of Indigenous presence”: the erasure of Nativeness, for example on the many official documents that are today used to determine an individual’s identity and heritage. Her book relentlessly challenges those assumptions that pervade the dominant culture that envision Indianness as something that will continue to “die” with mixed-bloodedness and urbanity. She also critically examines the legacy of how colonial regulation of Native identity has shaped Native self-definitions, varying between those whose Indianness is assured by federal regulation and those whose Indianness is not. As Lawrence explains, while one can certainly find mixed-blood individuals living on reserves, they are not labeled as such nor do they define themselves in these terms, since their status as Indian is legally assured. [2]

As Lawrence explains, in striking though always calm prose, the book presents us with “a metanarrative about encounters with genocide.” That metanarrative shapes the underlying premise of the book “that urban mixed-blood Native identity cannot be adequately understood except as shaped by a legacy of genocide” (p. xvii). Lawrence thus investigates how mixed-blood urban Native people understand and negotiate their own identities and how external definitions and controls on Indianness have impacted their identities, with especial reference to the Toronto Native community, the locus of her

ethnographic interviews and much of her life experience as both a scholar and activist. Toronto is an excellent choice, on a number of fronts. As Lawrence explains, Toronto in many respects represents the end point for urban mixed-blood Native people, “the setting where the most extreme levels of dislocation exists among its Aboriginal population, and the site where Native people as a whole are the most invisible” (p. 19). Given Toronto’s location in eastern Canada, where policies of displacement and genocide have had a longer history than in western Canada, many of Toronto’s Aboriginal residents are the products of numerous generations of intermarriage and exile, rendering them invisible to the dominant culture. Urban mixed-bloods in Toronto are forced to struggle with the realities of both invisibility and placelessness, eclipsed by the struggles of dozens of multicultural communities, and facing First Nations leaders who effectively deny their very existence. Lawrence explores the tensions and complexities of Native identity when one is mixed-blood, urban, and either possessing or lacking legal “Indian” status or band membership. Urban contexts such as Toronto’s, represent a real challenge for those self-identifying as Aboriginal: as the author explains, urban mixed-blood Native people by definition do not live in those few sites recognized by the federal government as Indian land. In addition to legally disqualifying individuals of mixed parentage, especially children of mothers who married non-Native men, stereotypes abound that suggest being Aboriginal and being urban and mixed-blood are mutually exclusive categories. Here Canadian nation-building discourses play a central role in teaching detribalized and mixed-blood children that they should see themselves primarily as citizens of the settler states, that any “real” Aboriginal identity is permanently lost to them. In highlighting the agency of her urban collaborators, Lawrence shows attempts at regaining, reinterpreting and renewing indigeneity. [3]

“Real” Indians and Others is exceptional in providing us with considerable detail and analysis revealing that urban mixed-blood Native people are not extraneous to indigenous communities; instead, they represent the other half of the history of colonization, the descendants of those displaced as a result of residential schooling, enfranchisement, the abduction of Native children into the child welfare system, and a century of removing Indian status from Native women and their descendants. Lawrence’s critique of federal Indian legislation is as thorough as it is persuasive. Her critique of racism effected through patriarchal principles is very solid, stunning and timely given recent protest movements such as that of the Six Nations which has sought to bring to light, amongst other issues, the deliberate sidelining of traditional female authority structures among the Iroquois. The end result of the various policies she examines is to continuously restrict and diminish membership in indigenous societies, until the “final conclusion” is reached: the elimination of indigenous peoples as peoples. The question of “Who is an Indian?” is thus highlighted as one impregnated with the history of colonial genocide. Lawrence is thus very critical of leaders of band councils that have assumed the same biases of federal legislation in controlling membership and excluding descendants from reserves. She calls for greater communication and cooperation between on-reserve Aboriginals and urban Aboriginals, in reconceiving themselves as “nations” and confederacies rather than as disparate bands. [4]

The volume is divided into three parts. The first dwells on different regulatory regimes, with especial emphasis on the Indian Act and then Bill C-31. The second part demonstrates the effects of these policies on the lives and self-definitions of mixed-blood Natives residents of Toronto. The third part shows how hegemonic images and definitions of “Indianness” stem from federal identity legislation and myths of the Canadian nation, and how these affect the self-perceptions of Lawrence’s collaborators. The final chapter attempts to delineate a different future, one that embraces all Aboriginals under the umbrellas of nations and confederacies, and she seems to take heart that such movements are already beginning to show signs of life. The appendices to the volume are also very valuable, one detailing the sometimes dismal contents of Bill C-31, the second producing a reflexive account of doing research with urban Aboriginals, and the third presenting more coherent narratives from a select number of her collaborators. [5]

The volume is remarkable for its many conceptual, historiographic and ethnographic strong points to the extent that any shortcomings do not readily appear visible. Lawrence does tend to emphasize description over theory, but not exactly, as the description is clearly focused and structured and the book is written in very readable prose. The theoretical basis of the volume is not rendered especially clear, and some pages that dispute both critiques of essentialism and critiques of constructionism necessarily leave us in limbo. Like some other writers, Lawrence is implicitly recognizing that rather than continue singing the old and tired tunes of the “primordialist versus constructionist” opera, this antagonistic dualism is better reconceived as a complementary dualism. How to organize the mass of information was clearly a daunting task, and there were no easy solutions. Lawrence opted for segmenting her collaborators’ narratives into discrete sections that addressed particular questions and themes of the book. Given the anonymity of her collaborators, it then became especially difficult to follow who was saying what (was this the same person who was adopted by white parents, or is this the daughter of the woman who lost status?), making it a real challenge to get a sense of the full profile of these individuals. Some of the middle chapters of the volume thus have to be read very carefully, and perhaps reread. The narratives presented in the final appendix should maybe have been moved to the start of the second part of the book. Some of the accounts of those interviewed were transcribed from tape perhaps too directly and automatically—I am not sure it is of value to read in a passage the numerous times a person says “you know.” In the final chapters, one can sense traces of rewriting that were not edited out. In a few instances, introductions to a chapter appear half way through the chapter, telling us what the chapter will be about when it is already abundantly underway. Finally, what I personally wished that Lawrence would have grappled with were the many taken for granted assumptions that surround so-called “wannabes.” Some of her collaborators, whose own identity as indigenous is questioned by on-reserve relatives, seemed to ready to use this label with others. What makes a “wannabe”? What is the problem with “wanting to be”? How much does this concept do to dismiss “marginal indigenes” and potential “immigrants” into indigeneity? However, in the end, these facets (which may appear as shortcomings more to some than others) really do fade into the background given the many achievements of the volume. [6]

With “*Real*” *Indians and Others*, Bonita Lawrence offers us one of the most engaging, thought provoking and important books one can find on contemporary indigeneity, especially when we consider its focus on urban Aboriginals and issues of race and indigeneity, areas which are still only lightly covered in the extant literature. The substance of this impressive volume is at once ethnographic, sociological, historical and political, written at times as auto-biography, legal history, as a source document in its own right, and as a reflexive and multi-vocal interpretation of firsthand accounts. “Real” *Indians and Others* should be of enduring value for both researchers and students in indigenous studies, anthropology, political science and history. Its relevance and applicability overflow the borders of the typical First Nations studies program and resonates with numerous situations, from Australia and New Zealand to the Caribbean, especially as voiced through the biographical narrations of both Lawrence’s collaborators and herself. Wherever the question of who is indigenous is hotly debated, wherever race and gender enter the discussion, and wherever orders of what Jeffrey Sissons calls “oppressive authenticity” are imposed on indigenous self-definitions, this book will be markedly relevant and revealing. [7]

Reviewer

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